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AUTHOR Woo, Joyceln Yen Yen
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how looking at the lived time of secondary school students in Singapore has generated questions for curricular theory and practice. In-depth interviews, three of which are described, show the intersection of temporality and lived experience. Students are aware of rational, "clock" time, but seem to understand that there is an experience of time that goes beyond clock time. Singapore educators have been concerned with the lack of historical consciousness among their young people, and have proposed curricular revisions to bring about an awareness of Singapore's past development. In the rush into organizing the learning and lives of young people, this paper challenges educators to look at temporality in its textured detail to consider how its lived materiality might generate new questions for curricular theory and practice. What time means to students must also be considered in educational planning. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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Title:

Cracking the time code: Making issues of temporality in curriculum visible

By Joyceln Yen Yen Woo

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Will a Dualistic Understanding Suffice?

When the issue of time is raised with my teaching colleagues, we all have stories to tell. Stories of guilt: I really should be grading this weekend but I'm out watching a movie. Stories of stress: I have to complete this report by the end of the day and it's already 3 o'clock. Stories of regulation: In my early childhood classroom, there is a toilet bell to tell everyone that it's time to go to the bathroom. Stories of physical needs: When I'm teaching, I have no time to go to the bathroom and I can't eat when I'm hungry. Stories of frustration: The department wants me to make my students complete 5 essays by the end of the semester but what is the point when we won't have the time to go through them in a meaningful way?

We don't self-consciously think about time very much but when a spotlight is shone on it, we all have many stories to share about our relation to time. If we consider the curriculum as a lived text, and consider "the learner" as a "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1996), then temporality must be a fundamental feature of this text and this world.

In our lifeworlds, temporality expresses itself in many modalities through many spheres of experience. There is the experience of stress, bliss, boredom and anxiety; there are institutional semesters, class periods and tracking of students into "slower" or "accelerated" tracks; there are society's pasts and futures which we try to get students to remember and project through the school curriculum; and inscribed in buildings and neighborhoods are our collective pasts and futures, and ways of remembering and forgetting that constitute how we remember, forget and project, in the present.

However, clock-time, quantifiable, divisible, and measurable, has had such a great hold over our imagination that even when we resist it, we can only frame the other time as that which is non-clock-time.

Slattery, for example, sets modern temporality against the postmodern as he critiques the modern temporality that underlies the National Education Commission's report on time and education. In his article, Slattery calls for educators to adopt what he calls the "postmodern vision of time" (Slattery, 1995), clearly making the distinction between the modern, scientific, product-oriented vision of time and the postmodern, complex, process-oriented vision of time.

In calling for a change in educators' "vision of time," Slattery regards the temporalities that regulate educators' lives as a "vision," a pair of glasses that can be put on or changed. He neglects to consider how these temporalities might entrain, penetrate and even constitute our lifeworld in many meticulous ways. The advocate for a postmodern vision of time, for example, still lives in a world where he writes and constructs sentences that manifest a linear temporality, where he still sets goals and objectives, tries to fulfill deadlines, and where no doubt, he still lives under the watchful eyes of the clock.

There are interconnected temporal worlds that are not considered in recommendations for educational change because they are not looked for. In the National Education Commission's report (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994), for example, it becomes easy for the researchers to recommend extending the school day without considering how social and cultural rhythms might be affected, or how the lived time of teachers and students might subvert changes conceived with the assumption that the world operates simply in a rational, predictable way. On the other hand, the curriculum thinker's dismissal of the temporality in the report simply as a "modern vision of time" that should be changed (Slattery, 1995) sets up an abstract oppositional position. This oppositional position remains a theoretical one that does not explain how the "postmodern vision of time" is supposed to be achieved in the everyday practice of education in the context of the rhythms that regulate the lives of teachers and students, the

issues of power in intersubjective time (Fabian, 1983), and how living in the modern world, our lives are ineluctably connected to the logic of modern temporality.

In my research with 17 and 18 year-olds in Singapore, I ask the questions, where is time, and how does time look and feel? I do this through in-depth interviews and photographs that the participants take of their everyday lives. In this paper, I will only talk briefly about how looking at the lived time of these young people has generated questions for curricular theory and practice.

Clock-time and the Incompleteness of Modernity

The precise numbers, 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock, represent the expression of time that we are most familiar with in everyday life, clock-time. The most apparent characteristics of clock-time, as articulated by Newtonian, are that it is quantifiable, divisible, measurable and can conveniently be expressed as a number (Adam, 1990, p. 50).

Of special significance to how education is organized is the place of Newtonian time in developmental psychology. The notion of developmental stages presumes an objective, linear, and universal standard of developmental against which children measure. In educational discourses, terms such as “developmental age,” “developmentally appropriate,” “peer group,” and “developmental phase” are commonplace. In fact, most schools are organized according to absolute age groups, presumably because people in similar age groups are assumed to be at the same developmental stage. Students who lag or exceed the expectations of their peers have to be committed either to special education or gifted education. The concern for charting the universal development of children across time can be traced to the late and early eighteenth centuries, significantly, when absolute time conceptions became popular (Slife, 1993, p. 33) and when modern life in its industrialized, capitalistic form emerged.

Time, in this crystallization, is assumed to be a "neutral medium" (Grosz, 1999,p. 3) in which events and actions are framed; a background that has no dynamic relationship with the experiences and interests of human beings. Henri Bergson calls this conceptualization of time, spatialized time (Bergson, 1965). The meaning of this time lies in the movement of the earth through space. It is its spatial quality that allows time to be divisible into the hour, the second, the minute and now, the beat.

Such temporality, when considered in the context of lived experience, wears a coat of dispassionate rationality. When I asked Yin Mei, an academically successful 18-year old girl in Singapore to talk about her future, she told me:

I don't know, it all depends on whether I get a scholarship, actually. If I get a scholarship and I get accepted into either universities in the UK or the US, I would probably go. And from what it looks like, I would probably be studying bio-medical engineering. And if I don't get a scholarship then I would probably stay in Singapore and I would try to get into medicine, if not then, I don't know what to do if I don't get into medicine and don't get a scholarship. Probably stay and study something [Q: why the choice?] Ahhh... I don't know. It seems to be the case that I strike off all other options and I'm left with this.... And I guess there is also quite a good future for this line and they are also giving quite a few scholarships for this.... If I get a scholarship I probably have to serve 6 years' bond, whichever is the body that gives me the scholarship... if I don't get a scholarship, I stay here in Singapore and I'll probably go through university, graduate, probably get a corporate job and it's all pretty monotonous. But if I do get a scholarship, then I have to serve my 6-year bond, which is pretty laid out for me also. It doesn't have adventure to my life.

In the context of Singapore, Yin Mei's goals and approach to her future would be considered very sensible and enviable. Growing up in Singapore, we are often told that we have a good future if we do well in school. We are presented with various role models through our educational institutions and through the media— the students from Gifted Schools, the President scholars, the Public Service Commission scholars.

The nuance of clock-time time that we see in Yin Mei's words is its rationality. The rational assumption is that anything that is planned will eventuate accordingly. Bergson explains that the modern conceptualization of time assumes a world "already made" (Jacobson, 1965, p. ix). This is a world that works according to reason, and which will yield the predictable and the expected. Bergson describes thinking in this fashion as an assumption that all occurrences can be "foreseen by any sufficiently informed mind" (Bergson, 1946, p. 21). Yin Mei is now looking forward to a scholarship possibly with a government body of a statutory board. Her future is all mapped out. It follows "the Singapore Plan" (Goh & Woo, 2001).

Modern time, however, is not a pair of glasses that one can choose to wear or not, as it is inadequate to talk about Yin Mei simply as operating within modern, rational time. At the same time that Yin Mei articulates her well-planned life, she also reveals an awareness of the closing of her possibilities when she tells me that she will "probably get a corporate job and it's all pretty monotonous" and, if she does get a scholarship, she will "have to serve my 6-year bond." Her tone of resignation suggests some residue, some remnant that is not subjectivised by The Singapore Plan. It almost seems like while her life story comports with the predictability of The Singapore Plan, she maintains a Zizekian "cynical distance" (Zizek, 1999, p.33) where she is aware of having struck a Faustian bargain for her "success" in the Singapore education system but carries on with it anyway.

The bargain is this: she organizes her time towards a pre-determined end and the reward is that there will be no surprises and in all likelihood, she will achieve what she has set out to do. Such a course is evident in several of her everyday activities. One of them is her choice of reading. While in the past, Yin Mei enjoyed reading Agatha Christie, John Grisham and Jeffrey Archer, she now reads only “the Booker Prize people” even though she finds them “a bit boring” because “they’re supposed to be good.”

Durée

Yin Mei’s statement about her future suggests that there is an experience of time that goes beyond clock time. The tone of resignation that colors her statement that she is reading prize-winning literature “because they are supposed to be good” for her future suggests that there is a qualitative experience of the filling of the duration from now to the future. Bergson urges us to consider *durée* (1965), the feeling of having lived in duration. Bergson explains that duration is neither internal nor external. It indivisibly combines the experience of “external flows” of time with our consciousness of the movement of time. Blondel explains:

The feeling of having lived in duration is indispensable to the understanding of what months and years are, and the objective processes that society has adopted in order to measure time would be unintelligible without the original experience of the way it unfolds and the realities that fill it (cited in Minkowski, 1970, p. 23).

While apparently fulfilling the structured “plan,” Yin Mei is simultaneously living and experiencing the time that is at once pregnant with a sense loss, of change, of having made certain decisions about her life. This is a temporality that “knows neither subjects nor objects,” that neither has “distinct parts, nor direction, nor beginning nor end. It is neither reversible nor irreversible” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 18). This is phenomenological time or lived time.

What are the textures of *durée* that we want our curriculum to evoke?

While Yin Mei will, in all likelihood, continue to be successful academically and fulfill her plan for the future, she seems to regard her future with some trace of reluctance. Where is the *aching* to “break through a horizon,” the *aching* “in the presence of the question itself” (Greene, 1988, p. 124)? Consider Razi's story of his future:

We like hanging out with each other ... we still stick to the more simple things in life ... Jamming is nirvana for us! ... There are a lot of things that I want to achieve. I want to direct my own movie, I want to have a successful band, not really a commercial one, but just a successful band. I want to write my own novel, my own company, start my own company. Be my own boss, a lot of things.

The words of Razi, an 18 year-old boy who attends a polytechnic in Singapore, seems to bear some of the “aching” that Maxine Greene refers to. There is a yearning for what he might be. When I asked him about playing in his band, he says that they are a “poor band.” Razi has had to “borrow a guitar from [his] brother-in-law” as he cannot afford one, and the little money he makes from his part-time job, he pays for his share of the jamming studio that his band plays in. He explains, “we just get an acoustic guitar and a recorder and we just make songs. That's the best for us.”

“That's the best for us” (Razi) and “because they are supposed to be good” (Yin Mei). Two different hues of experience in the light of their present stances towards their futures. Two different modes of “waiting” for the future (Fujita, 1985). In wanting to educate students to be future-oriented (Bruno, 1995), in wanting students to engage in more structured, useful activities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992), in presenting them with role models, how

are we asking our students to experience *durée* in the present and what experiences of *durée* are we getting them to get used to?

McHistory Anyone?

Using *durée* as a frame of analysis for the broader societal sphere of educational experience, collective *durée* in Singapore seems to comport with the experience of the “turnover time” (Harvey, 1997, p. 290) that is constituted by “a series of pure and unrelated presents” (Jameson, 1991) that theorists of postmodernity talk about. In the photographs of their everyday lives that my interviewees showed me, the world of fads and the marketing of images is evident through the ever-new Play-Stations, magazines, and cell phones that they access. A ubiquitous form of communication is the sending of short truncated messages through the cell phone to each other several times a day. In these messages, the sentences are abbreviated and the service remembers only a few messages before they disappear from the memory of the phone.

As a nation, modernization in Singapore has been rapid and intense. Modern Singapore is a modern city whose government prides themselves for transforming the tiny city-state from third world to first world in a 30-year span since independence in 1965.

Worried about the lack of historical consciousness amongst a young populace that is growing up in the age of the internet, the Ministry of Education in Singapore launched the National Education initiative in schools in 1997. According to Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, “this was to be a curriculum that would teach students the history of modern Singapore so that students will be “proud of our country... proud of what we have achieved together – our economic progress, our clean and green environment, our open and clean system of government, our way of life” (Chua, May 18, 1997).

Singapore is a city that constantly talks about “upgrading,” where there is constant building and rebuilding (Kwok, 2000). My interviewee, Yin Mei’s family upgraded from public housing where her family knew her neighbors to a private housing estate where each household had a garden and rarely spoke to each other. The friendships in the life of Melissa, 17, reveals something of the phenomenology of living the rapid modernization of Singapore. Melissa speaks of memory of the playground that she shared with her friends at Bras Basah Complex until most of the families she used to play with moved to their new homes.

Because in Bras Basah, floors 1 to 4 were shops. The 5th floor was an empty ground. Then from the 6th floor onwards, there were two blocks of flats. All the way until the 25th floor. They lived there. I can still remember which floor they were in ... In the beginning, we simply played together, 4 of us. Me, the fat boy, and the other two boys. Initially we played roller-blades. Then, we were very excited when we went to choose our roller-blades and the different types of guards. We all went together to buy. After buying, we started playing, played for about a year or two.... go along, you are more proficient already. I learned it when I was in Primary 5. My best friend taught me. Then after that, I went to play with them. I learned it through torture. I crashed into a tree. I couldn’t balance and crashed into a tree. Don’t know what happened. Then, initially we were playing roller-blades ... then that Yee Leong introduced his cousins to us. Initially it was a children’s group... then came his older male cousin. He was in secondary school.

Melissa talks about her memories of playing with her friends at Bras Basah Complex with considerable vividness. In her words, there is a sense of any idyllic time, when time was marked by when she learned to roller-blade, when her group of friends expanded and various

While the aim of the National Education initiative is to instill historical consciousness, if we look at temporality of this initiative, it in fact re-inscribes an a-historicity. History is packaged in a Coke bottle and attempts are made to produce historical consciousness in the school-factory. Following the launch of the National Education initiative, schools developed curricula that would teach National Education. Commercial curriculum developers produced National Education CD-roms, National Education web site design competitions were held. Teaching in a secondary school in Singapore at that point in time, I had to show in my syllabus how I was inserting the National Education component in my teaching. Students in Singapore went on many historical field trips to places that were presumed to be able to instill historical consciousness in the students.

The temporality of the initiative was not unlike the very a-historicity that it tried to temper. In the same way that modern Singapore was able to achieve economic success in a short time, we wanted to achieve historical consciousness in young people instantly. How can historical consciousness be achieved in a form that tries to manufacture historicity through the temporality of a production line?

What is the lived historicity of young people in Singapore?

Historicity

Huebner talks about historicity as a consciousness of how one is partaking of the creation of the history of his/her society just as the individual is created by the historical movements of the society (1975). How are young people in Singapore partaking of the creation of the history of their society? I look at the friendships in the life of Melissa, 17, to consider the phenomenology of living the rapid modernization of Singapore through changes in housing.

other experiences. The cadence of her memory changes from the continuity of the time at Bras Basah Complex to the sudden interruption of this continuity when she talks about what happened when many of her playmates' families moved out of the housing block above the Complex:

No more already. So when they suddenly broke off, they broke off when I was half way through sec 3. So from middle of sec 3 to sec 4, I cannot, the memory is like, fall back to that time. It is gone right, but the memory is saved in that period of time. So it was a very tough time, my memory kept going back to that time. And sometimes, I refused to come back to the present. So it was very difficult. I have tried calling them to ask them to come back, but in the end, if one person is busy, we wouldn't play. That kind of attempt is very difficult. So now I'm used to it already. It's better.

The constant "upgrading" of housing in Singapore's history is experienced by Melissa as the forced disappearance of a space of good, fun times. She says with some resignation, "I'm used to it already." While the National Education initiative tries to instill a love for Singapore through an awareness of the history of Singapore, the lived historicity of her citizens manifests a having to "get used to" premature separations from our connections to the place.

Adam suggests that time is not external living things, but that "we also *are* clocks" (Adam, 1990, p. 75). In pondering the words of the young people, it became apparent to me that we are clocks in many ways. Not only are we clocks in a biological sense, with our circadian rhythms and our physical transformations, we are also clocks in the ways we learn to respond to the many beginnings and ends in our lives. One of the emotional challenges of teaching is having to begin all over again with a group of new students at the beginning of each school year. The students I taught cried at the end of each school year and promised each other that they

would stay in touch and gradually, as Melissa explains to me, they are never spared from “the silent drift” as they are in different classes, in different tracks, in different schools.

I am not suggesting that there should be no change. The question I am posing is, to what extent are these many beginnings and ends, connectedness and separations thrust upon us and to what extent they are a part of the “becoming” that we “make” and that “belongs to” us (Lukacs, 1999, p. 204)?

If young people in modern Singapore are considered a-historical, it would be wise to consider how the curriculum of historicity might in part be located in the many separations that we have to “get used to” in our lives.

Framing curriculum as “a concern for man’s temporality” (1975), Huebner calls for curriculum to be aimed at providing environments in which the student is able to envision his/her “projected potentiality for being” (1975, p. 249), thereby partaking of the creation of the history of his/her society, just as the individual is created by the historical movements of the society. Perhaps the issue of a-historicity lies in the curriculum that teaches us that we just have to “get used to” not partaking of the creation of the history of our society. We teach our students to drag their spirits, do the things that are “supposed to be good,” and become like “the poor souls that wander restlessly, but outside of history” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 185).

Final Thought

In the whirl of technological and globalizing processes, each nation is bandying about the need to master the future and ensure that education is geared towards the preparation for living in a changing world. Amidst the rush into organizing the learning and lives of young people for productive futures, this paper challenges us to look at temporality in its textured detail, and to

consider how its lived materiality might generate new questions for curricular theory and practice.

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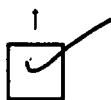
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